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What Does Jesus Mean by "What Comes Out of a Person is What Defiles Them"?

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In Mark 7:20, Jesus says, *"What comes out of a person is what defiles them."* This statement is profound and touches on the nature of human sinfulness, revealing that the source of our defilement is not external, but internal. To fully grasp the meaning of this verse, we need to explore the context in which Jesus spoke these words, understand their significance, and apply them to our lives with the support of Scripture.

The Context of Mark 7:20

Mark 7:20 is part of a broader discussion where Jesus confronts the Pharisees and teachers of the law about their emphasis on external rituals and traditions over the true condition of the heart. The religious leaders of the time were concerned with ceremonial cleanliness, believing that eating certain foods or failing to wash in a prescribed manner could make someone unclean. They questioned Jesus because His disciples were eating without performing the traditional hand-washing ritual (Mark 7:2-5).

In response, Jesus criticized them for their hypocrisy, quoting Isaiah: *"These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules"* (Mark 7:6-7, CSB). Jesus then declared that external factors, such as what we eat, do not defile us. Instead, it is the evil that comes from within—the thoughts, words, and actions—that truly make us unclean.

The Meaning of Mark 7:20

Jesus' statement in Mark 7:20 underscores a crucial spiritual truth: sin originates from the human heart. He continues in verses 21-23, explaining, *"For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance, and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile a person"* (Mark 7:21-23, CSB). Here, Jesus lists the various sins that can emerge from within us, emphasizing that our sinful nature is the real source of defilement.

This teaching aligns with other Scriptures that highlight the heart's role in moral and spiritual behavior. For instance, Jeremiah 17:9 says, *"The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?"* This verse reveals the corrupt nature of the human heart, which is inclined toward sin and rebellion against God.

Similarly, Proverbs 4:23 advises, *"Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it."* The heart, in biblical terms, represents the core of our being, encompassing our thoughts, desires, and will. Therefore, Jesus' focus on the heart in Mark 7:20 directs us to examine our inner lives, recognizing that true purity and righteousness must begin within, rather than being imposed from the outside.

The Spiritual Implications

Mark 7:20 challenges us to reflect on the state of our hearts. It is easy to become preoccupied with external appearances and rituals, believing that they make us right with God. However, Jesus teaches that God is more concerned with what is inside us—our motives, thoughts, and intentions. This truth is echoed in 1 Samuel 16:7, where God says, *"The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart."*

This understanding leads us to a deeper awareness of our need for God's grace. Since sin originates from within, no amount of external adherence to religious practices can make us clean before God. We need a transformation of the heart, something only God can accomplish through the work of the Holy Spirit.
The process of transformation begins with recognizing our sinful nature, as described in Romans 3:23: *"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."* It continues with repentance, turning away from our sinful tendencies, and seeking forgiveness through Jesus Christ. 1 John 1:9 assures us, *"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."*

Finally, we are called to walk in the Spirit, allowing God to renew our hearts daily. Galatians 5:16-17 encourages us to *"walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh."* This ongoing renewal is essential for living a life that honors God from the inside out.

Application for Today

In today's world, where there is often a strong focus on external appearances, achievements, and rituals, Jesus' teaching in Mark 7:20 is a powerful reminder to prioritize the condition of our hearts. Many people, including Christians, can fall into the trap of thinking that religious activities, church attendance, or moral behavior alone can make them right with God. While these are important, they are not substitutes for a heart that is genuinely surrendered to God.

True Christianity calls for an inner transformation that leads to outward change. This transformation happens as we submit to God, allowing Him to cleanse us from within and fill us with His Spirit. As we grow in our relationship with God, our thoughts, words, and actions will increasingly reflect His character, and we will bear the fruit of the Spirit, such as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

In conclusion, Mark 7:20 teaches that what truly defiles a person is not what they consume or how they observe religious rituals, but the sinful attitudes and actions that come from the heart. Jesus calls us to look beyond outward appearances and focus on the inner life, where true purity and righteousness are cultivated. By allowing God to transform our hearts, we can live lives that are pleasing to Him, marked by genuine holiness and love.

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